

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AT THE TUSKEGEE NORMAL AND INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study identified events during the life of Booker Taliaferro Washington and during the early years of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School that may have contributed to the development of agricultural and industrial education for African Americans. Washington's experiences as a former slave and his observations of life for African Americans in the South in the late 1800's may have shaped his philosophy of agricultural and industrial education. Washington believed that agricultural and industrial education contributed to the mental development of students, helped students secure the skills necessary to earn a living, and taught students the dignity of work. African American students wanted an education, but they often could not afford to attend school because they lacked the funds to pay tuition. The labor system and agricultural and industrial education provided the means by which they could labor for their education. It is concluded that Washington saw that the need for farmers, skilled artisans, and machinists was equally important to the academic preparation of lawyers, physicians, and professors. Agricultural and industrial education met this need. Under Washington's leadership, Tuskegee Institute offered 37 industrial occupations on the campus and school farms.

Introduction

On July 4, 1881, a normal school for African Americans opened its doors for the first time in the village of Tuskegee, Alabama. Its principal, Booker Taliaferro Washington, was an African American and a former slave. Washington believed in the importance of a practical industrial education. Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School was established and administered for that purpose. Tuskegee students were unique in that they were former slaves or the children and grandchildren of former slaves. This influenced how Washington viewed agricultural and industrial education, and how he administered the educational programs of the Tuskegee School (Harlan, 1975). In order to be relevant to an entire race of people who had only recently been afforded the right to a formal education, agricultural and industrial education had to concern itself with more than academic skills. It was essential that students learn the importance of and an appreciation for personal improvement and professional work habits. Washington committed himself to transitioning a race of people out of

slavery and into citizenship, a task that proved extraordinarily difficult given the state of African American schools and schooling during the late 1800's. Washington's students possessed the barest of social and literary skills. They had to learn how to dress, eat nutritious foods in a graceful manner, maintain their personal hygiene, and learn how to interact socially with each other and with members of other ethnic backgrounds (Washington, 1995). The problem of educating African Americans in the years after their emancipation was not the result of an inferior intellect, but rather the result of inferior opportunities for education, industry, and livelihood. Before Washington could prepare his students for a professional career, he believed he had to teach them to have an appreciation for professional service (Harlan, 1975).

Washington believed that for education to be of any use, it had to have practical significance. Education must strive to educate the young men and women in their present environment, though he did not doubt the value of an education that exposed students to a wide variety of subjects

including the arts, foreign languages, and the sciences. Given the lack of time and resources to provide a holistic educational experience, Washington believed it is in the best interests of students to offer them an education that provided useful work in their present environment, so as to provide the best service to mankind (Washington, 1882). This theory served as the foundation upon which the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School was built, and established Washington as an eminent educator at the turn of the 20th century.

Purpose

The first objective of this study was to describe historical events during the life of Booker T. Washington that may have contributed to the development of agricultural and industrial education for African Americans at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School. The second objective was to describe the historical events associated with the operation of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial school during selected years of Washington's tenure as principal, specifically 1881 to 1907.

Method

Historical research procedures outlined by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) were used in this study. A preliminary bibliographical source was created consisting of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included but were not limited to the personal correspondence, published manuscripts, and speeches of Washington, and photographs and demographic data from Tuskegee University. Secondary sources included but were not limited to data from refereed journal articles and historical information available from established institutions. Secondary sources were compared to selected primary sources to ascertain their accuracy.

This study conforms to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) regarding the terms used to describe ethnic groups (APA, 2001). Using the methods prescribed by Gall et al. (1996), sources of information were subjected to

internal criticism for accuracy and external criticism for authenticity. The most recent editions of publications authored by Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and others were used in the literature review. This accounts for the modern dates on some publications in the reference list. Readers should not assume that the findings and conclusions of this study are causal elements for modern theories associated with agricultural and industrial education, nor should the reader generalize the findings beyond the specific historical events described in this paper.

Findings

One of the first lines in Washington's (1995) biography, *Up From Slavery* was, "I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. My life had its beginnings in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings" (p. 29). Washington was born to a slave mother and an unknown father on the James Burroughs plantation in Franklin County, Virginia around 1859. Like most slave births, his was probably on a bed of rags spread on the dirt floor of his mother's slave cabin with her sister serving as midwife (Harlan, 1975). An inventory of the estate of James Burroughs in December, 1861 listed several slaves including one named "Bowker" valued at \$400 (Scott, 1863). As a slave on the Burroughs farm, Washington's early life was similar to most African American slave boys – deplorable living conditions and no opportunity for formal education.

In early 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was read to the slaves on the Burroughs farm. In the crowd that day was a young Booker Washington and his family (Washington, 1995). In addition to the tears of joy in his mother's eyes, Washington remembered that these newly freed slaves were suddenly moved from a life where everything had been controlled by someone else to a new life wherein they were required to think and fend for themselves. The great responsibility of having to think and act freely and provide for themselves and their families was a sudden and awesome thing (Washington, 1995). "It was very much like turning a youth of ten or twelve years out

into the world to provide for himself.” (p. 40). After emancipation, Washington’s family moved to Malden in the Kanawha Valley of West Virginia.

As a young man, Washington worked in the salt furnaces and coal mines of the Kanawha Valley (Washington, 1995). Eventually, he was able to secure employment as a servant in the home of General Lewis Ruffner, the owner of the coal mine. In the Ruffner household, Washington learned that improvement in one’s social condition was strongly dependent on intelligent energy (Harlan, 1975). He learned to be attentive to details and how to maintain a clean and neat appearance personally and in his professional work. Under the guidance of the Ruffners, Washington developed an interest in a higher (secondary) education. In the fall of 1872, he left West Virginia to seek an education at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia (Washington, 1995).

Hampton Institute was an industrial school for African Americans and Native Americans. It was established and administered under the leadership of Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a former United States Army officer and Freedmen’s Bureau agent. After traveling almost 500 miles to reach Hampton, and being virtually penniless, Washington’s appearance did not create a favorable image to the head instructor. Washington recounted in his autobiography that his entrance exam into Hampton was to clean a lecture hall (Washington, 1995). Washington assumed that his performance on this task was used to determine if he was indeed a potential student or merely a vagrant looking for a handout. The head instructor was impressed with his diligence and work ethic, and enrolled him as a Hampton student. He excelled in most things and like other students, worked for his room and board (Washington, 1995). The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (1875) identified Washington as a senior student during the 1874-75 term. On June 10, 1875, Hampton Institute awarded him a license to teach a graded school (Whipple & Armstrong, 1875).

Upon graduation from Hampton, Washington taught school in Malden,

Virginia and attended seminary for a brief time in Washington, D.C. As a young teacher, Washington aspired to provide his grade school pupils with as good an education as he could muster. In a letter to a Hampton teacher circa 1877, he thanked his colleague for the textbooks he had sent to his little West Virginia school, and asked for more teaching materials as could be sent to him. His first year of teaching had found him not only learning algebra for the first time but also teaching it to his eager students (Washington, 1878). In *My Larger Education* (Washington, 1911), Washington recounted how he discovered that his students tended to learn best when provided with concrete examples and situations pertinent to the lesson. In a lesson on geography, students had listlessly followed his instruction in the classroom. At recess, the children assembled at a stream near the schoolhouse and began to discover:

...as we waded along the stream, dozens of islands, capes, and peninsulas, with here and there a little lake or bay, which, as some of the pupils pointed out, would furnish a safe harbour [sic] for ships if the stream were only large enough. (Washington, 1911, p. 132)

As the students began to distinguish the similarities and differences between the stream bed and the geography lesson, it became apparent to Washington that he had discovered a powerful new teaching tool recognized today as experiential learning. Writing about it years afterward, he recalled,

“I have lost no opportunity to impress upon our teachers the importance of training their students to study, analyze, and compare actual things, and to use what they have learned in the school room and in the text-book, to enable them to observe, think about, and deal with the objects and situations of actual life.” (Washington, 1911, p. 134)

The energy by which young Washington approached his teaching duties attracted the attention of his former principal. In 1879, Washington was invited by Armstrong, principal of Hampton

Institute, to give the post-graduate lecture at Hampton to share his experiences as a young teacher and graduate of Hampton with the rest of the Hampton students (Armstrong, 1879). Armstrong believed that Washington was a model of the benefits of the Hampton system. Eventually Washington found his way onto the faculty of Hampton (Harlan, 1975). One of his responsibilities was providing instruction and leadership to Native American students. Washington excelled as a teacher, and garnered the favor of Armstrong who was to become a valuable mentor and supporter.

In 1881, the Alabama State Legislature appropriated funds for the purpose of establishing a normal school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama. The commissioners appointed to establish the school wrote to General Armstrong seeking a White teacher for the new school. On May 31, 1881, General Armstrong responded, "The only man I can suggest is one Mr. Booker T. Washington." (Armstrong, 1881, p. 110). Washington accepted the job, and headed south to Tuskegee in the summer of 1881.

The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School

On July 4, 1881, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School opened for students. Washington saw four major problems at the outset of the work of Tuskegee. First, the school had to provide a system of education for a race of people that was essentially illiterate. Second, the efforts of the new school had to convince the White community that an education of value could be provided for the African Americans (Washington, 1995). Third, the school initially met in a local church, and it was apparent that permanent school buildings were needed. The \$2000 from the Alabama Legislature would not be enough to construct buildings and provide the material for instruction. There were virtually no supplies or materials with which to begin school, and yet Washington expected to open the school approximately one week after arriving in Tuskegee. There were no maps, or teaching aids readily available, and books had to be borrowed from the

libraries of friends of the Tuskegee school (Washington, 1881a). Fourth, many of the students in the first class were destitute and could not afford the tuition. Washington was keenly aware of this last problem. In the very early days of his work at Tuskegee, Washington had surveyed the rural Black communities of Alabama. He ate and slept in the homes of sharecroppers and former slaves, learning from this experience the particular needs of African Americans in the late nineteenth century (Washington, 1995). The rural South, Washington observed, was one of extreme poverty among African Americans.

Washington turned his attention first toward establishing a permanent footing in the Tuskegee community by securing a permanent site for the school. By establishing a cooperative, energetic, and permanent presence in the community, Washington hoped to simultaneously abate these and many other problems, especially the race problem. Washington located an abandoned plantation on the outskirts of Tuskegee and decided that it would be an excellent site for the new school. The main house had burned some time previously, and the only buildings on the old plantation reserved for the school were two cabins, a stable, an outhouse, and a henhouse (Washington, 1995). The first classes that met on the old plantation used the henhouse as the classroom. The first desks were homemade affairs with boards serving as rough desks. The blackboards supplied by the carpentry department were very rudimentary in design and construction (Gregory, 1915).

The Labor System at the Tuskegee School

In the long run, Washington realized that significant measures had to be taken to build the school and make it a permanent institution. After careful thought, he adopted the Hampton Institute method that placed students on a labor system for their room and board (Washington, 1881c). In this manner, Washington hoped to build the school, feed the students, and provide practical experience in the industrial arts.

Washington introduced manual labor by having students clear woodlands for the planting of crops. The students reluctantly performed this and subsequent other laborious tasks. Their reluctance stemmed primarily from the fact that many of them had been professional teachers prior to attending Tuskegee. The early days of elementary and secondary education did not see many college graduates as teachers. Many of the teachers in early African American schools were not even high school graduates. Their license to teach was issued by the county in which they taught after passing what was often a rudimentary exam. Many of Tuskegee's early students were these teachers whose opinion of their academic status often exceeded their actual academic performance, and the result was a corps of students who felt that manual labor was beneath them (Harlan, 1975). To get the labor system moving at Tuskegee, Washington would lead the students out to the forest and chop timber alongside them to set the example of the importance and dignity of hard work (Gregory, 1915). In spite of early student resistance, the system took hold quickly and by the middle of the first month on the new school property, students had cleared 25 acres of farmland by manual labor (Washington, 1881b).

In July, 1881 Tuskegee School trustees had secured a note to purchase the 100-acre plantation upon which the school resided. Within four months of opening its doors, Washington's Tuskegee Institute paid the debt on the land and owned a free and clear title to the property. Now Washington focused his efforts on recruiting high quality teachers and constructing suitable buildings. During that first year of operation, Tuskegee grew to 112 students and three teachers (Tuskegee State Normal School, 1882). New buildings were needed in order to accommodate an increasing student enrollment (Washington, Davidson, & Cardwell, 1882). Students built a first building, and many of the earlier buildings on the campus were constructed by student labor and from bricks made on the Tuskegee campus. This first new building was three stories tall and contained classrooms, a chapel, a library, and lodging for students (Tuskegee Normal School, 1882).

Washington had developed positive relationships among the wealthy Northern philanthropists because of the work at Tuskegee. He found himself in a position to abate some of the hostilities between Black and white citizens. In 1895, Washington was invited to give a speech at the opening of the African American Farm Exhibit at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. Washington exhorted African Americans to "cast down your bucket where you are" and make peace with the Southern whites without demanding the rights of suffrage and enfranchisement:

We [African Americans] shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third or more of its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic. (Washington, 1895, p. 5)

Washington explained to the audience that African Americans, in slavery, had demonstrated a willingness to work with whites. Now that slavery was no longer the issue, African Americans would perhaps be more inclined to cooperate with whites to assure mutual progress, and that said progress would not hinge on socially divisive issues. Washington stated, "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (Washington, 1895, p. 4).

The Curriculum at Tuskegee

Washington believed that the strength of Tuskegee rested in the agricultural and industrial education program instead of the academic program, and in 1905 the focus of the curriculum shifted towards agricultural and industrial education as the primary function of the school (Washington, 1904). Teachers of academic programs were required to reduce the students' workload in English, mathematics, history, and related subjects (Harlan, 1983).

During this period, Washington introduced the concept of *dovetailing*. Washington derived the term from the type of wood joints commonly used in carpentry, and was a combination of academic and industrial subjects. Washington required academic teachers to use industrial and agricultural subject matter as the basis for assignments. Math teachers found themselves teaching students to calculate feed rations and English teachers were soon assigning home economics students to write papers on the methods of cooking vegetables. Washington's goal was to eliminate the differences between academic and industrial subjects. Academic teachers complained that dovetailing eliminated "learning for the sake of learning". Academic teachers were also quick to point out that the agricultural and industrial program utilized the time-consuming apprenticeship method that lessened the amount of time available for academic instruction (Bruce, 1906). Regardless of resistance by the teaching staff, Washington believed in the dovetailing method and arranged an elaborate system to insure its application in the classroom. In a letter to the principal of the Chicago Normal School, Washington wrote:

When a student of one of the shops is required to write a composition for his industrial instructor, this instructor examines the paper and marks it as to its technical correctness; the paper is then sent to the English division of the academic department where it is examined and marked upon the grammar. (Washington, 1907, p. 150)

Under Washington's leadership, the dovetailing method was strictly enforced. Teachers who could not or would not use it in their lesson plans were reprimanded or dismissed (Washington, 1906). To ensure that agricultural and industrial education would continue to thrive, Washington effectively held off attempts to convert the institution into a college or university. This was not entirely unusual because of the poor condition and limited availability of public schools for African Americans in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The majority of

land grant universities authorized under the 1890 Morrill Act were predominantly primary and secondary schools, and remained so until the late 1920's when college-level enrollments finally exceeded primary and secondary enrollments (Harris & Worthen, 2004). Washington believed in higher education for Blacks, but not as a substitute for agricultural and industrial education. He believed that a professional class of African Americans could only survive if supported by a foundation of African Americans working in the industrial class who could afford to pay for the service of the professional class (Washington, 1899).

Conclusions and Discussion

In reflecting on the beginnings of agricultural education for African Americans, did the profession inadvertently install a "glass ceiling" that perpetuated the idea that the best African Americans could hope for were service occupations in agriculture and industry? In his zeal to establish a useful school for Blacks in rural Alabama, did Washington create a system that prevented his students from reaching beyond manual and service labor?

During the latter part of the 19th century, as white industrial schools formed into engineering and the professional sciences, industrial schools for African Americans tended to focus on less ambitious goals. These schools tended to focus on traditional agricultural subjects and manual trades. Washington believed that the status of African Americans was deteriorating in the years following reconstruction. African Americans were without marketable skills, and had seemingly lost their incentive for self-improvement (Harlan, 1975).

Washington believed that agricultural and industrial education served a distinct and necessary purpose in the mental development of students. A second purpose of agricultural and industrial education was to help students secure the skills necessary to earn a living. A third purpose was to teach students the dignity of work. Washington saw all of these purposes as interconnected. Thousands of African American students in Alabama wanted an education, but because

they lacked the funds to pay tuition and the means to secure these funds, they often could not attend school. Washington deemed agricultural and industrial education as a means for allowing students to attend school by providing the means by which they could labor for their education. Further, Washington deemed agricultural and industrial skill development as the useful byproduct of this type of education.

Furthermore, Washington believed that 200 years of slavery had effectively stripped African Americans of their dignity. Washington believed that as long as slavery existed the plantation masters were compelled to keep the African American in a state of ignorance to assure contentment with the condition of servitude. With the abolition of slavery, he contended that to elevate the African American race required an educational system equal in value to that of the Caucasian race (Washington, 1995). After emancipation, African Americans had to learn that there was indeed a certain amount of dignity in labor (Washington, 1882). Washington did not see mental and manual training as a new idea, but he believed that it was the first best hope for freed men. The Emancipation Proclamation had freed the slaves, but had also left them with virtually no resources beyond the ability to perform manual labor. Agricultural and industrial education taught freed slaves how to read and write, and provided them with manual skills necessary to find suitable employment. Contrary to the way some of his contemporaries viewed him; Washington believed that a need existed for academic education in the preparation of lawyers, physicians and professors. However, he saw that the need for skilled artisans and machinists was just as significant (Washington, 1882). Agricultural and industrial education provided this through its labor system and Washington's *dovetailing* method of instruction. As a normal and industrial school, the Tuskegee Institute under Washington's leadership offered 37 industrial occupations on the campus and 1,000 acres of land (Washington, 1995).

The development of agricultural and industrial schools for African Americans in the years following the American Civil War was no easy endeavor. While engaged in the

enormous task of educating an entire race of people, Tuskegee, Hampton and other industrial schools had to survive the White supremacist sentiment that often surrounded their work, and also defend against attacks by the African American intellectual elite. Agricultural and industrial education strove to develop African Americans into skilled workers and business persons and perfect their self-esteem. Dubois (2004) disagreed with this in *The Souls of Black Folk* by asserting that Washington's efforts to create skilled artisans were useless without the right of suffrage. Washington's accommodation to White superiority worked against the efforts of agricultural and industrial schools to improve the self-esteem of African Americans. Dubois and others contended that Washington's disdain for higher education for African Americans was disingenuous because he needed college-educated African Americans to operate the Tuskegee Institute (Dubois). Black intellectuals viewed Washington's speech at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895 as an accommodation of White superiority.

Dubois failed to acknowledge that Washington was indeed working behind the scenes for suffrage for African Americans and more equitable relationships between African Americans and their White counterparts in business, industry, and government (Washington, 1904). Washington's successful career as a southern Black man was built on his ability to compromise, and yet he provided funding and leadership to efforts to repeal laws discriminating against Blacks. Even though Dubois and Washington disagreed on the education of Blacks, they worked together to abolish Jim Crow laws in Georgia and Tennessee, and they both shared the same goal of elevating the Black race out of poverty (Forth, 1987; Harlan, 1971; Washington & Dubois, 1907). Furthermore, correspondence between Washington and Tuskegee donors does not indicate a systematic attempt to relegate African Americans to lower income service professions (Harlan, 1983). Tuskegee's mission was to prepare teachers, business professionals, farmers, and tradesmen. Along with technical knowledge came

lessons about the need for a strong work ethic and the appropriateness of self-improvement. Washington's message of self-help and self-improvement was congruent with the personal views of many of the philanthropists he courted, and donors were drawn to Washington and his work at Tuskegee (Harlan, 1983). Washington veiled his efforts on behalf of Black suffrage largely because he could neither afford to alienate southern Whites nor damage his ability to raise funds and support for Tuskegee. Tuskegee may have been built with funds derived from Northern philanthropy, but there was no doubt that the school existed very much in a southern political environment.

Has the glass ceiling disappeared? Washington's Tuskegee served a useful purpose in the training of African Americans for industrial trades, and his work in the community of Tuskegee, was a significant attempt to encourage good relations between the races. However, regardless of how the Whites of the village of Tuskegee felt about Booker Washington, the ethnic unrest of the early and mid-twentieth century indicated that the U. S. was not yet ready to accept the African American on his terms.

Has agricultural education changed significantly for African Americans in recent years? Croom, Moore and Armbruster (2005) surveyed the participants of the 2003 national FFA career development events to determine their reasons for participating in agricultural education and the FFA. Of the 2,145 survey responses, none came from African American students. If there were any African American students in the national career development events, it would seem that at least one or two would have completed the survey instrument. The implication is that African Americans continue to represent an underserved population in agricultural education, and the profession should find better ways to "turn them on" to agricultural careers.

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